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ON DUBIOUS BATTLES

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by

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The Americans departed the Indochinese peninsula in 1973—the French had been gone since 1954—leaving its three countries henceforth subject to political parties professing allegiance to the same ideology. And still the wars go on, sometimes between armies, sometimes between an army and local guerrilla forces. The retreat of the Western powers has not left the people of the region to themselves, to their desire for independence, or to their local quarrels. Involved until recently in the East-West conflict, the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians are now caught up in the rivalry between the two leaders of the Marxist-Leninist bloc.

The analyst, wanting to score against the Marxist-Leninists, finds in these circumstances favorable opportunities to do so. The Marxist-Leninist leaders profess to share the same ideological doctrine, a claim which they refute by their actions. Capitalism is by its nature imperialist, they say, and socialism is by its nature pacifist—then how does the analyst reconcile these articles of faith with his experience? The Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge, allied against the Americans and the governments that the Americans supported, seem to have anticipated the new test of strength from the very day of their common victory. The Chinese had supported and resupplied the Hanoi government during the first war against the French as well as during the second one against the "puppets" of Saigon and the United States. Four years after the fall of Thieu, however, we find the Vietnamese closely allied with Moscow, integrated into COMECON, and at the same time considered to be enemies by those same Chinese, the formidable neighbors whom they have resisted for centuries.

East-West rivalry has followed certain rules which, while unwritten, were more or less respected. The rule most seldom violated was the one forbidding the crossing of national boundaries by regularly constituted armed forces. It seems that this rule no longer inspires the respect it once did. As a case in point, the armed forces of India, which were governed at the time by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, crossed the common border with East Pakistan, which was in revolt against the so-called central government at Islamabad, some 3000 kilometers from Bengal. Is it necessary to accuse the former "Empress of India" of aggression? Certainly, in a formal sense. But what was the alternative she faced? The people of the region that became Bangladesh had voted overwhelmingly for the Independence Party. Negotiations between General Yahia Khan and the founder and head of the Independence Party, Shiekh Mujibur Rahman (since assassinated) had failed. The latter had been thrown into prison; a revolt had broken out and repression followed. The insurgents in the eastern province had proclaimed statehood and begun resistance and guerrilla activities. In the absence of Indian intervention, insurgency and repression would have continued for years on end. There can be no doubt as to the illegality of India's actions; but one hesitates before a political or a moral judgment.

In Africa it was President Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, accompanied by Ugandan refugees, that attacked the bloodthirsty despotism of Idi Amin. As of this writing, the Tanzanian forces have not withdrawn nor has Uganda formed anything resembling a stable government. Should one applaud the fall of a tyrant or instead fear that the practice of nations taking international law into their own hands is gaining adherents? If the neighboring states of a people maltreated by their leaders can sit in judgment on those leaders and take military action against them with impunity, then the foundations of the United Nations Charter will collapse. And rarely does the outsider act with total disinterest.

The invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese is in a sense a reprise of the preceding incidents. Eastern Pakistan suffered under a brutal military regime; Idi Amin deserved to be punished as he was. The Pol Pot regime inflicted shocking suffering on its people. Led by quasi-intellectuals trained in Paris and supported by the Chinese, the Marxist-Leninist rulers of Cambodia were responsible for the deaths of as many as 2 million of their countrymen. Each of the participants in the case in question—the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the People's Republic of China—conducted itself in accordance with either the teachings and customs of pure power politics or an exaggerated Machiavellism. The Soviet Union, wanting diplomatic and military bases in the area, sought a reliable ally to the south of China. Applying the same logic, China did its best to break the encirclement by weakening a Vietnam now won over to the Soviet cause. There remains the case of the two small countries, Vietnam and Cambodia. How is it that neither of them tried to avoid the quarrel between the larger powers?

Insofar as anyone can determine, the conflict between the Vietnamese and the Cambodians was at the outset neither provoked nor manipulated by the Russians and the Chinese. Apparently it had begun even before the defeat of American "imperialism," going back to the time when the North Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge had come to power. If one were to believe Prince Norodom Sihanouk on the matter, Pol Pot and his advisors were obsessed by the Vietnamese peril. In their delirium they imagined themselves toughening and preparing their people for the supreme test, for the Khmer struggle to survive against the Vietnamese who wanted to annihilate them.

For all that, a politico-strategic analysis seems simplistic. The Marxist-Leninist parties are hardly accusing one another of betraying the truths they hold in common. The Chinese are certainly not affirming the superiority of the Khmer form of Marxism over that of the Vietnamese. What the Chinese are doing is denouncing the Vietnamese aggression, an incontestable fact according to the customary language of international law. The Vietnamese rebut this position, citing first various Cambodian provocations, and only secondarily the atrocities for which they hold the Pol Pot regime responsible.

The Chinese, in their turn, have introduced something new into the language of international relations, inflicting a "punishment" on the Vietnamese in order to penalize them for their aggression against Cambodia. From Mrs. Gandhi and President Nyerere to the Marxist-Leninist leaders of Peking, Phnom Penh, and Hanoi, cynicism becomes more apparent as, little by little, the role of peacekeeper gives way to that of the vigilante. In the absence of an international community entitled to intervene against a bloodthirsty despot, are those leaders who arrogate to themselves the right to judge a neighboring regime any better than those they condemn? Sometimes it is almost scandalous to bow before the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of states; at other times, intervention appears as odious as passivity. So long as there exists no authority superior to that of the state, how can one resolve the dilemma? The detached observer, the man of good will, leans one way or the other according to the circumstances. I preferred the Indian aggression to a long guerrilla campaign. However, if the Vietnamese had acted out of concern for the

Khmer people, they would not have invaded Cambodia and placed into power "dissidents" who arrived in baggage cars from Vietnam, thereby adding to the misfortunes of a people bled white and ravaged by bombing, the war, and the madness of the Khmer Rouge.

Thus do the events in the Vietnamese peninsula mark another phase in world politics; perhaps they reveal another style of relations among sovereign states. Should this development be attributed to the Marxist-Leninist beliefs of the belligerents or to other, essentially historic, traditions? I hesitate to reply, but I'm inclined to say that neither is the case. In Europe, respect for frontiers is explained by the face-off between the armies of the two superpowers. The two sides have accumulated too much dynamite for either to risk the striking of a match. The struggle for Berlin developed cautiously, for West Berlin was symbolically American territory. It is noteworthy that Stalin did not hold Tito to the discipline of the community *manu militari* as did Khrushchev the leaders in Hungary or Brezhnev those in Czechoslovakia. Was Stalin more prudent than his successors? Was the division of Europe not yet sufficiently stabilized? Did the lack of a common border between big brother and the intractable little brother create an obstacle? While all these reasons appear plausible, for me the conclusive reason is that Stalin thought that Tito and his people would fight against an aggressor, even the Russians. The Hungarians struggled, but in a few days the affair was finished. In Yugoslavia there was a risk of prolonged conflict.

In Africa, the leaders of the new states agree on the principle of mutual respect for their borders, less from submission to the United Nations Charter than from fear of challenging the frontiers themselves. Those frontiers, in effect, were traced arbitrarily by European powers from one point on the map to another, cutting some ethnic groups in half or thirds while gathering dissimilar ones together. Consequently, most of the nations of Africa opposed the Biafran revolt in order to safeguard Nigerian integrity. In the same manner, the Somali incursions in the Ogaden to support the Somali insurgents against the central authority of Addis Ababa found little sympathy elsewhere in Africa. Thus is a politico-legal principle transformed into a moral obligation. For how long I would not venture to say; nations have a tendency to persevere in their present state.

Should one consider the Indochinese case unique, even abnormal? We can say rather that many circumstances favored the renewal of conflict after the Western retreat. The Chinese have a tradition of limited operations on their frontiers. In 1962, they taught India a lesson on the heights of the Himalayas. This time, the "punishment" inflicted on Vietnam also meant a challenge to the Soviet Union. The latter did not accept the challenge, for reasons of which we remain ignorant. The Soviet Union is powerful enough to demonstrate that it fears no one. Is it possible that the Soviets hope to normalize relations with the PRC?

Vietnam totally dominates both Laos

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and Cambodia by its population, its resources, and its army. In the past, it was the Vietnamese who had accelerated the decline of the Khmer Empire. Once France had created an Indochinese federation, the Vietnamese considered themselves the inheritors of that federal authority. They had no need for an open invasion to install themselves as masters in Laos. As for Cambodia, when the Americans called in South Vietnamese troops following Lon Nol's coup d'etat, they were greeted by the people not as allies but as invaders. The Vietnamese might have been able to establish their rule in Cambodia as they had done in Laos; Pol Pot's aggressiveness provided the Vietnamese the opportunity, in the absence of justification, to apply force.

The United States and the Europeans, faced with that imbroglio—a struggle between gangsters—remain spectators, somewhat stupidly. Alternately they condemn the Vietnamese invasion and disapprove the punishment administered by the Chinese to the guilty party. The Chinese leaders, as a result, would seem to have developed a certain scorn for the Americans, who no longer resist Soviet hegemony, and for those Europeans as well who make it an article of faith to ignore the Soviet menace. Whether on the ground or around green-covered tables, nothing has been resolved. Cambodian resistance continues, while at the United Nations the representatives of the Khmer Rouge still occupy the Cambodian chair. Prince Norodom Sihanouk belongs to neither of the two communist "regimes," the one a slave of Vietnam, the other hiding in the jungle. Cambodians are going to die by the thousands, by the tens of thousands, during the coming months when the Vietnamese Army resumes its offensive.

Westerners presently have no role to play in that part of the world. They are not directly responsible either for the horrors of the Pol Pot regime or for Vietnamese imperialism. But neither can they—the French first, and then the Americans—ignore the part they played in the misfortunes of these people. It is not a question of awakening yesterday's emotions to say that one or the other was correct, but rather to reflect as a matter of conscience on the morality, the amorality, or the immorality of foreign policy.

In 1944-47, the choice, so to speak, was evident. Having barely emerged from the night of the Occupation, France, at the time governed by General de Gaulle, sent an expeditionary force to Vietnam, where it was destined to take part in the final battles against Japan. The northern part of the country was occupied by the Chinese, the south by the British. The French troops were to relieve the occupation forces, but once the relief had taken place and French captives were freed from Japanese prisons, what should have been the objective of the provisional French government? A unanimous response would develop readily today: the idea of a French Union should not be used to conceal the perpetuation of a semi-colonial regime in Vietnam. On the contrary, it should permit progress toward independence. The Viet Minh did indeed start the war in 1946, but the French bear the primary responsibility for it by their bombing of Haiphong and by their creation of a government of Cochinchina to prevent the unification of the ancient kingdoms (the three Ky) of Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin.

In those days, the issue did not present itself as a matter of conscience. We had not involved important figures in a political adventure against Ho Chi Minh, nor had we begun to integrate indigenous troops into the expeditionary force. Resistance to Japan was confused with the local nationalist movement. Beyond the controversy and the negotiations, there was only one issue: whether to accept openly the end of the colonial regime and therefore the independence of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, or to try, as we did, to retain a part of that which we pretended to give up. Ho Chi Minh's nationalists were either communists or directed by communists, but neither General de Gaulle nor the ministers of the Fourth Republic—at least until the war in Korea—were leading a crusade or following a policy of containment against communist

expansion. They were defending the French Empire. In a conversation that I had with General Navarre in 1953, he refused to think of France's combat as an element of Western or American anti-communist strategy. The Americans were looking for noncommunist leaders independent of France, while the French sought leaders who were in favor of the French Union and inclined to be content with the idea of autonomy. To simplify historical reality without falsifying it, one can say that the first Vietnam War had as its cause the French refusal to grant independence to the three countries of Indochina, more precisely to the so-called Viet Minh party, a coalition in which the communists held all of the key positions.

In this case, morality, to the extent that one could use the word, corresponded to the national interest of the country. In 1945 the Allies—the Americans and the British—had accepted the principle of self-determination. Americans and Soviets alike condemned the European empires. The French themselves no longer believed in their civilizing mission; how many among them would have believed it moral to sacrifice men and resources to preserve some vestige of imperial authority? And national interest did not suggest a different decision. André Malraux told me in 1945, attributing the same opinion to General Leclerc, that 10 years and 500,000 soldiers would be necessary to reestablish French authority in Indochina. They were unduly optimistic. After the communist victory in China, neither 20 years nor a million troops would have been sufficient.

True, we surrendered people that we had "protected" to a regime which we know today to be ruthless and inhumane. The supporters of French Algeria reproached me for having lost interest in the Algerian people, in effect abandoning them to the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic. In 1945 and 1946, Vietnamese communism was indistinguishable from the demand for independence. Circumstances did not offer us the liberty to choose from among the various claimants to power in the liberated nation. Under the pretext of turning down Ho Chi Minh—General de Gaulle still rejected Ho Chi Minh's solution in 1950—we prolonged a hopeless struggle for eight years. A local defeat and the Soviet Union's position on the problem at the time led to the Geneva accords, which in the final analysis permitted us to save face and do that which we should have done eight years earlier.

In 1954, however, we could no longer deliver all of Vietnam to the Viet Minh. We had created a Republic of Vietnam, recognized by most of the Western nations. That republic possessed an administration and an army. Inevitably the war produced a separation comparable to that in Korea. South Vietnam, which included part of Annam as well as all of Cochinchina, found itself opposed to North Vietnam less by tradition or historic ties than by its opposition to communism. In other words, it was the first Vietnamese war, more than the separation of the country into Chinese and British zones of occupation, which created the conditions for the second war.

The Geneva accords, with a view toward unification in two years, anticipated free elections based on universal suffrage. At the instigation of the Americans, Diem brushed them aside. For that matter, who thinks that the President of South Vietnam could have campaigned in Hanoi or could have held a public meeting there? Neither in Korea, nor in Germany, nor in Vietnam, all divided nations subject to mutually hostile governments, could reunification occur by free elections. From 1954 onward there remained but two possibilities: coexistence of the two Vietnams or reunification by force originating in the north.

The decision to abandon South Vietnam to its own resources had become far more difficult than would have been the case had the French decided to negotiate with the Viet Minh and recognize the unity of the three kingdoms. In 1954 the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff warned the President against the dangers of intervention. There could be no army without a nation; it was

necessary therefore to create a country so that the army could carry out its mission. What decision did a political and moral analysis of the situation suggest? In 1968 the entire left, in France and throughout the world, vilified American imperialism; today some among them acknowledge their error and many more question their earlier behavior. As for Solzhenitsyn, implacable, he denounces the West's lack of courage.

In 1960 the majority of the South Vietnamese had no desire to rejoin their brothers to the north under the iron rule of the communists. At the same time, they supported (or at worst accepted) their country, under attack by the other Vietnam, which was impatient to impose its form of government on a state whose very existence and legitimacy it refused to acknowledge. If the North Koreans or the East Germans made the same attempt, who would not accuse them of aggression?

American policy in Vietnam was not in itself immoral if one accepts the previous propositions—if the South Vietnamese were not waiting for the northerners to arrive as liberators. It conformed to accepted practice in the rivalry between the superpowers and protected a country (or half-country) from the rigors of the Hanoi regime. Why was that policy repudiated little by little by American public opinion and vilified by world opinion, even outside of those regions which are always hostile to the United States? I see several reasons: first, the instability of the Saigon government, the circle of generals, and the customary ills of governments financed by the United States, such as corruption and arbitrariness; second, the popular doubt regarding a state that seemed incapable of surviving without the presence of American forces; and finally, the type of war adopted by the American forces in Vietnam, the bombing, not just of the Ho Chi Minh trail, but also of Hanoi and the rest of North Vietnam.

In the United States, opinion came progressively to perceive the war to be immoral the longer it lasted and the more remote that victory seemed. As a dubious conflict for a poorly understood national interest, the Vietnam War tore apart the country and contributed to the protest of the young and of the students. Moral revolt, said some at the time; lack of courage, counters Solzhenitsyn. To idealize their revolt, they idealized the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese government. Should we ask them now to confess their delusion or their error? Were the hawks more correct than the doves? Neither one nor the other was entirely right or entirely wrong.

Diplomatic decisions, particularly those which involve or risk involving recourse to military force, must first and foremost be submitted to a test of possibilities involving the relation between ends and means. Anyone who pledges to an ally support which he knows that he cannot provide violates the specific morality of the jungle where the states, the "cold monsters," compete. After the occupation of the Rhineland, France could not honor its treaty with Czechoslovakia except by declaring war, a decision that the French were not prepared to make. Georges Bonnet and Edouard Daladier probably hoped to dissuade Hitler by threatening him with war over the Sudetenland without the firm intention of carrying out that threat. It was the same in 1939 with Poland; perhaps they thought that even after the fall of Poland there would not be a war.

There comes to mind an idea of P. J. Proudhon. In one of his books, *La Guerre et la Paix*, which deserves to be better known, he suggests that the rights of a state do not exceed its strength—its capacity to assimilate conquered peoples:

> . . . as means of conquest, battles were no longer the standard. . . . The annexation of Nice and Savoy had been presented by the imperial government as a *correction of the frontier*, motivated by the unexpected expansion of the Piedmont. . . . Algeria alone has become our conquest; but that conquest remains thirty years later what it was the first day, a military occupation. . . . France has spent on a yearly average in order to retain that trophy fifty million francs and twenty-five thousand men. The imperial government complains about it just as the government of Louis-Philippe used to do.[1]

By refusing independence to Vietnam, France asserted its right to use force without possessing the means to do so.

The Americans fought a war which in the last century was known as a war of principle, but which today is called a war of ideology. It would appear paradoxical to accuse the leaders of the United States of having overestimated their strength. But power does not consist solely of weaponry and of the military value represented by soldiers and their leaders. The will—the unity of the people—also constitutes an element of the nation's strength. The United States paralyzed itself by forbidding the mining of the port of Haiphong—except at the last moment in order to snatch a peace of sorts from a defeat—and by adopting a defensive war of attrition.

While its bombers freely crossed the demarcation line, the ground forces never did. To attain its political goal—to set up a South Vietnam capable of holding its own unaided—what military objective should have been established for the American expeditionary force? Because the United States failed to think clearly about the task entrusted to its military leaders, they conducted operations that were at once undefined, ineffectual, and cruel. One can debate whether the United States lacked power, or, having it, was incapable of using it. The principal fact remains unchanged: American policy in Vietnam, legitimate in its intention, became apparently immoral because of the destruction it entailed without attaining its objective. Whoever judged events in that light would not convince either side and would, moreover, attract the wrath of both. Nevertheless, one could neither develop illusions about the government of a unified Vietnam nor advise the continuation of a war which called into question the unity of the American people and which diverted the imperial republic from its worldwide role. In foreign affairs, immorality is sometimes born of blindness, of incompetence, of delusion.

The case of Cambodia stirs up even more passion. Faced with the martyrdom of that country, victim of famine and Vietnamese conquest and now threatened with oblivion, who can avoid questioning himself? What responsibility have I assumed by my pen if not by my actions? Jean Lacouture has raised a cry of horror and of remorse. We knew that the Khmer Rouge were communists, and we did not refuse to believe Solzhenitsyn when he announced that concentration camps were spreading throughout the countries of the Indochinese peninsula. We did not know the Khmer Rouge, however. Who, therefore, are the criminals? Those who decided to bomb the strip of land containing the bases where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese withdrew to rest? Those who hatched the coup d'etat that overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk and put General Lon Nol into power? President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who, in what was probably a strategic error and through indifference to the Cambodians themselves, allowed the country to become an operational area? Today some claim that it would have been worth the trouble to continue the war in order to have saved the Cambodians from the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Others claim, with as much reason, that years of bombing and combat created the "new men" of Vietnam and Cambodia who were apparently insensitive to feeling and, as it were, intoxicated by violence, comparable to drug addicts who can no longer live without their poison.

I refuse to take part in those controversies. In 1944-45, even before the defeat of Germany, I favored not returning to Indochina unless it was to negotiate the independence of the three countries (a position that scandalized the Gaullists). Subsequently, I did not take a public stand against the Indochinese war, not because I supported a policy that the leaders themselves did not approve of, but from an awareness of the trap we had fallen into and from which there seemed to be no honorable exit. I took a stand with regard to Algeria because my voice carried farther in 1957 than in 1946 or 1947.

Who can now recall the Indochinese wars with a clear conscience? Neither those who supported unconditionally the Viet Minh and the Khmer Rouge, nor those who urged the United States into the war and swept

Cambodia into the storm can congratulate themselves or be proud of their actions. To have peace of mind these days, one would need the faith of a perfect Manichean, capable of seeing where the good is and where the evil. And that Manichean would require also a virtue rarely in harmony with his faith: the transfer of values, with good becoming evil and evil becoming good. Between Moscow and Peking, between Peking and Hanoi, how are these roles distributed?

These remarks, footnotes to a story full of sound and fury, illustrate the never ending dialogue between violence and morality in international relations. The beginning of the tale saw the decay of an empire and an assertion of national rights; in spite of the differences among the three kingdoms, Vietnam appeared as a nation, unified by Tonkin, the strongest of the three parts. Playing on the opposition between North and South, and under the illusion of preserving part of their colonial authority, the French set off a civil war inside Vietnam which merged with the war of decolonization. Subsequently, the war for the liberation of Vietnam became entangled in the East-West conflict and finally in the Sino-Soviet rivalry. French policy in 1945-46 is the least excusable, because it was based on an erroneous concept of national interest, on an overestimation of French power, and on a failure to recognize Vietnam's right to independence. That right was asserted by a party which followed the communist line. At least independence could have been accorded to the noncommunists of the south, a step taken by the Americans, and not by the French. The independent state of the South ultimately yielded to the superior strength of the North, and the unity of the three kingdoms was realized in 1975, 30 years after the refusal of Thierry d'Argenlieu and the French government. That refusal seems to me in retrospect to have been neither prudent nor moral. Some will raise the objection that the imperialism of the Viet Minh, which had Saigon in view in 1946, has since conquered Phnom Penh and Luang Prabang as well. No one can say with certainty whether Vietnam, unified in 1946, independent and formally integrated into the French Union, would have evolved as it did during the 30-year war. On the other hand, that war illustrates tragically the maxim that our acts follow us: we are prisoner of the consequences of our conduct. In 1945 we could have left Indochina with honor. In 1956 or 1957 we could have negotiated honorably the phases of Algerian independence. In 1962 our departure from the latter country was not honorable, for we abandoned the native "harkis" to the vengeance of the conquerors, our forces having received orders to repatriate the smallest possible number of those Algerians who had chosen our side. Henry Kissinger relates that General de Gaulle told President Nixon in 1969 to get out of Vietnam as quickly as possible. The general forgot that he needed four years to give up Algeria.

Must we condemn the war of principle, never to defend a government that we prefer against an odious regime that belongs, moreover, to the other side? Obviously not. The Vietnam War threw the United States into confusion, not because the war was of itself immoral and imperialistic, but because it came gradually to appear so. It took on this appearance, first because the United States either dared not or knew not how to use its power, and second because the United States had to lose politically without the excuse of a military defeat. Dien Bien Phu helped France to negotiate, because French governments were too weak to reach that decision without an excuse; General de Gaulle transfigured the abandonment of Algeria by his highsounding rhetoric. The Americans lacked both a Dien Bien Phu and a de Gaulle, but is the American struggle justified after the fact by the crimes of the Vietnamese and the Cambodians? Do those crimes reprove the American retreat? To which the other faction replies that the Khmer Rouge would never have come to power if the Nixon-Kissinger policy had not devastated the country. The retrospective debate remains as impassioned as the arguments at the original moment, the worst of it being that each group in a way possesses part of the truth.

NOTE

1. P. J. Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix* (Paris, 1861), I, 328-29.